1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER THREE

GETTING FOOD

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261 For the Lepchas, as for almost all primitive peoples, by far the most important subject in their lives is food. Far and away the greatest part of their lives is centred round food-getting; it is impossible to over-stress its importance. But because food-getting is so constant a preoccupation, and because it is fairly featureless and uneventful, it nearly always, it seems to me, receives far less attention than it deserves. The features chiefly dealt with by ethnologists, including of course the greater part of this book, are those which take place during the primitive's leisure. Some peoples, I am aware, centre their social and religious life about food; 771 but this is not the case with the Lepchas. Food-products play a considerable rôle in the objects of sacrifice, but with the lamas this aspect is not stressed; most ceremonial objects are made out of grain-flour and butter, but this is because they are the most convenient and easily accessible materials; by the time they have been fashioned the edible qualities of these objects are not apparent. A minor sacrifice is made when a new field is taken into cultivation for the first time, and prayers are said, usually by a layman, after each sowing; and the Mun make elaborate ceremonies, to be described later, yearly at the flowering of the cardamum, and at the sowing and gathering of dry rice. In the annual cycle of lamaist ceremonies there are a certain number which are devoted to the protection of crops from hail and predatory beasts, and, before the sowing starts, some seed is collected from each household and given a communal blessing at a monastery service; but these rites take an insignificant place in the yearly sum of religious ceremonies. Lepcha religion is above all occupied with health.

261 Food does however play a very important rôle in the Lepchas' 152 emotional lives. Love, whether between spouses, friends, or parents and children, is considered to be the result of mutual

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

benefits, and foremost among these mutual benefits is the gathering and preparation of food. For Lepchas love is never automatic; if they say they love a person they will always explain why they do so. Even with young children this attitude is firmly implanted; if you ask one if he loves his parents he will almost certainly reply 'I love my father and mother because they give me my food.' If you ask about their feelings towards other people they have visited the answer again is always in terms of what they were given to eat. Rigya, a young man of twenty-two, said of his parents 'I love them both very much, but especially my mother; when I was young they gave me food and clothes and looked after me; now in my turn I must look after them.' He has been fairly recently married and at first he and his wife did not get on at all well together: 'At first we could not even look at one another, but now we are good friends; when I go out to work and come back tired my wife has food ready for me and looks after me; then I love her and think to myself "this is my wife", and I am pleased in my belly.' It may be noted that the belly is considered to be the seat of the emotions.

All ceremonial occasions among the Lepchas—birth, marriage, and death, religious ceremonies, exorcisms, and civil consultations—are marked by the consumption of extra large quantities of food and drink. Even the most solemn religious ceremonies are turned into picnics. Important past events are often remembered in terms of what the participants had to eat on such occasions. When I tried to get some of the best-adjusted Lepchas to talk about their own early lives they replied by giving me lists of menus.

The Lepchas are practically omnivorous; the only animals that they do not eat which some other races do are cats and dogs, rats and mice, horses and snakes. They eat all wild animals that they can kill or find dead, and keep and eat oxen, goats, pigs and hens; they also eat a great variety of wild forest produce, chiefly tubers of different wild yams, and various leaves which are used as seasoning; both meat and vegetables are supplementary dishes which add a relish to the cultivated cereals.

As has already been said, in former times and still today in the less fertile regions, the Lepchas relied on hunting for a great deal of their food; but in Lingthem and most of the other villages of Zongu game is hunted less and less. There are a number of reasons for this which interact on one another; the stigma which the Lepcha interpretation of lamaism places on the killing of animals excludes

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

early arrival of the monsoon drove us defeated from the slopes of Everest.

During the period in which it is wished to keep the rain away the Lama must have no connection with his wife; nor should he touch water, but must confine himself to *chi* or tea. There is no harm in looking upon water, but one should on no account wash in it. The area in which rain can be kept away is the whole extent of country visible from the place where the ceremony is being performed. Thus, although Talung is not visible from Lingtem, Tafoor can keep the rain away from that place because the hills above it are visible.

When Tafoor was learning his period of instruction was terminated by a ten-day fast in a completely dark room, into which he was sealed by his teacher. He felt very hungry for the first two days, but after this he had no particular desire for food. He was not even allowed to leave the room for the purposes of nature and remained sitting in the so-called "Lotus position" for the whole ten days, telling his beads and meditating. As soon as the fast was over he came straight out into the living-room and no arrangement was made to accustom his eyes gradually to the light. He was given a little weak tea and some thin gruel, but even this gave him intense pains in the stomach. On the second day he had a small amount of normal food, after which he resumed his ordinary diet.

In offering to stop the rain while I went up to Talung, Tafoor warned me that his efforts might be completely unsuccessful, for he says he can only do it when his mind is completely in accord with that of the person who wishes the rain kept away; otherwise it will rain harder than ever. He is quite unable to do it for his own brother, for instance: whenever Chodu asks him to keep the rain away, and he has tried many times, it rains as though the end of the world is approaching. But he has never yet had a failure when asked by the Mandal or his senior wife. With others it is possible to ease the rain off sufficiently to make work possible, but not to

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

illness which is hereditary in the family. Numerous examples prove that the Shaman disposition does in fact appear as a kind of illness."[105]

Our own studies have brought to light the existence of similar dispositions among the Rong. In both places there is the same conception of the spirits of Shamans. These spirits sometimes take the form of animals, *e.g.*, that of a bull. "His bull-form walks abroad, is also said by the forest Juraks, when the soul of a Shaman has departed to another world."[106] They also bring the deceased into the kingdom of the dead.[107] All these facts run a close parallel to our findings among the Rong and other primitive hunter tribes in India.

Further similarities are found in the mode of consecration and instruction. The Shaman costume however is fundamentally different. The Rong have no special costume, while among the different Siberian peoples, a wide variety of customs are worn.

(*k*) The Social Classes of the Rong.

According to the general tradition existent among the Rong, they claim to have been originally a race of hunters, and that in the very early times before the Tibetans, the Bhutanese and the Nepalese had infiltrated into their country, they lived as the free rulers of the immese forests which were their home. The Lepchas have a clear knowledge of the animals, the birds, the plants, the fruits and the roots, and can tell which are poisonous and which are edible. Even today the Lepcha will not starve if the harvest fails, for he will procure as his sustenance the edible leaves, fruits and roots from the forest. One such root is the dayout-buck. After being dug up it is broken into small pieces and soaked in water for three days to remove the poison and clear off the lye. A ferment is then added and a kind of beer produced. Another root is the dog-bo or bok-yik. It is cut up, the lye cleared, and then it is cooked and crushed. The broth is eaten like rice. This is of a pale violet colour.

105. op. cit. p. 452.
106. op. cit. p. 478.
107. op. cit. p. 478.